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Selway Bitterroot Wilderness

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The Selway Bitterroot Wilderness, a vast and varied area of rugged mountain country, straddles the Montana-Idaho border. The largest federally classified Wilderness in the Continental United States, it contains 1.25 million acres. Elevations range from 1,750 to 10,000 feet above sea level. If the weather is severe in the high country of the Bitterroot Range or the Selway crags, you can retreat to the warmer, more protected lower Selway River. There is a wide variety of wildlife and vegetation.

About 120 lakes dot the Wilderness, many of them in spectacular glacial cirques. Although glaciers have long since receded, a number of small, perpetual snowbanks remain. Sparkling streams cascade down steep wooded canyons, carrying nearly three billion acre-feet of water yearly to the Bitterroot, Selway and Lochsa rivers.

The Selway Bitterroot Wilderness is named after the area's two major physiographic features — the Selway River and the Bitterroot Mountains. The name "Selway" is from the word "Selawak," which in Nez Perce Indian language means "smooth water." The mountain range was named for the delicate Bitterroot flower. The Bitterroot, first classified "Lewisia Rediviva" by explorer Meriwether Lewis in 1805, is Montana's state flower.

The Indians made little use of the area. Their trails, linking the Clearwater Valley with the Bitterroot Valley, ran to the north and south, avoiding the extremely rugged terrain of the Bitterroot divide. Summer encampments were along the upper Selway, lower Bear Creek and Moose Creek drainages. In these areas the Indians fished for the abundant cut-run salmon and steelhead trout and hunted the natural mineral licks for deer and elk.

Trappers worked a major portion of the area. You

can still see the remains of many of their old line cabins. Also, you might notice martin sets notched in trees. The design of these nooses varied with the individual trapper from a cathedral or rounded shape to a rectangular notch. Trapping the area was not an easy job, however, as fur hunters braved the dead of winter in search of pelts. One trapper, known only as Archer, died while hunting his trapline on skis. The end of his fall down a precipitous slope is marked by his grave.

A few homesteaders moved into the Selway River and Moose Creek drainages after the land was opened to settlers in 1908. The first to settle that year was Henry Pettibone. Pettibone cultivated a few acres near the Selway Lodge, made some crude improvements and raised some livestock. He is buried on a small bench overlooking the land he loved. Eight more homesteaders moved in between 1912 and 1916. All but one remained in the Moose Creek area, beginning what might have been a small settlement. But time and the hardship of packing supplies over 40 to 60 miles of treacherous, unimproved trails forced all but a few to give up and move away. Five of the original homesteads remain in private ownership.

Early settlers constructed many small storage dams on the high mountain lakes. Many are still in use today, providing late season water for irrigation.

The Selway-Bitterroot Primitive Area was established by the Forest Service in 1932. After a study and several public hearings, the Secretary of Agriculture in 1963 established the present Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. On passage of the Wilderness Act on September 3, 1964, the area became part of the National Wilderness Preservation System. The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968 further protects all lands along the Selway River from any development or manmade disturbance.

the area

management

weather and seasons

winter travel

People visit this Wilderness throughout the year. The lower elevations, along the Selway River, remain free of snow from mid-March through November. Snowstorms may occur in September at higher elevations. Trails at altitudes above 5,000 feet are usually free of snow from July through mid-October. Early spring travelers should be prepared for high, fast water at most stream crossings. Fords on the Selway River are impossible at this time.

Make certain you receive the latest weather condition information and make thorough preparations prior to beginning a winter trip into the Wilderness. Avalanches are common and have left slide paths in most drainages. A pamphlet, "Snow Avalanches" is available at the Clearwater National Forest headquarters, Orofino, Idaho; Nezperce National Forest headquarters, Grangeville, Idaho and the Bitterroot National Forest headquarters, Hamilton, Montana. It contains suggestions for avoiding and surviving avalanches.

fire ecology

Fire is one of the environmental factors influencing the variety of landscapes in the wilderness. The Wilderness Act recognized that wilderness shall be "protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions." Forest fires have been a natural process in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness in "retaining its primeval character and influence."

Lightning causes greater than 90 percent of the fires in much of the Selway-Bitterroot. Many plant and animal species (ponderosa pine, lodgepole pine, redstem ceanothus, fireweed, huckleberries, deer, elk) are well adapted to the cyclic nature of these fires. Some species are rather dependent on fire for their continued existence in wilderness ecosystems. Other species are characteristic of more mature forests. Both kinds have a place in wilderness.

Forest Service management calls for a more nearly natural incidence of fire in the wilderness. Studies in the White Cap Drainage of the Selway-Bitterroot established the concepts and procedures of wilderness fire management. Knowledge and strategies now available permit the perpetuation of unmodified ecosystems in the wilderness.

geology

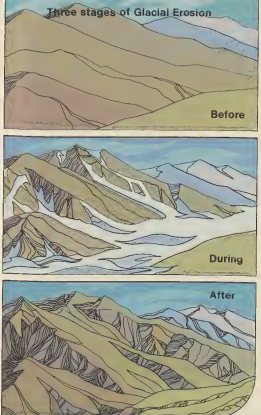
This Wilderness lies almost entirely within the Idaho Batholith — an area where molten rock from deep within the earth intruded into existing metamorphic rocks. This process took several million years, ending about 65 million years ago.

Metamorphic rocks were formed when sediments, laid down at the bottom of inland seas in pre-Cambrian times more than 600 million years ago, were altered by heat and pressure. Batholiths rocks and the older metamorphics are found throughout the Wilderness area.

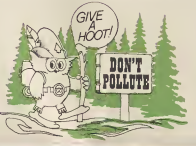
Some geologists believe the large block of mountain country extending from the Bitterroot Valley west for about 100 miles is still being uplifted. It is also being eroded and shaped into the landforms we see today. The deep, steep-walled canyons are the result of extensive downcutting. In addition, recent glaciation above 5,000 feet has produced the U-shaped valleys, cirques, lakes and pools, cirque headways, moraines and polished bedrock.

Large cracks or joints can be found in some of the exposed granite rock. These are caused by "pressure release jointing" as overlying rock is eroded away and pressure on the rock is decreased.

Surface and ground water in many places has decomposed the feldspar crystals in the batholith rock, forming the "grus" or rotten granite, which can be crumbled by hand. The more resistant quartz crystals remain relatively intact.



notes



take nothing but pictures leave nothing but tracks

If you use the Wilderness properly, the person who follows will never know you were there. Neither law nor administrative edict can save this Wilderness from human carelessness. Unless those passing through are considerate, the Wilderness scene will ultimately fade and pass away. Wilderness recreation has already increased to the extent that restrictions on camping, grazing and other activities may become necessary to protect these popular areas from permanent damage.

Visitors are requested to fill out registration cards provided at major Wilderness entrances. These cards, which provide information about the number of people visiting, their destinations and hometown addresses, help the District Ranger better meet your needs and preserve the Wilderness resource.

The use of all types of motorized equipment, including snowmobiles, chainsaws, generators and trail bikes, is prohibited by law in the Wilderness. The following exceptions for aircraft are permitted: Landing fields at Moose Creek, Shearer and Fish Lake are open to aircraft. Landing strips are recommended for use only by pilots skilled in mountain takeoffs and landings.

Suitable camping sites are generally abundant. To help maintain the Wilderness solitude, locate your camp

camping



plant life

Flowers bloom at various elevations through the summer and first begin to dot the landscape as the snowbanks retreat. Late in July, buttercups, shoot-into stars and trillium flourish high on the mountains where growing conditions are harsh.

Majestic stands of Ponderosa Pine are found at most lower elevations. Along Moose and Bear creeks, summer visitors enjoy the refreshing shade of the stately cedars.

our wilderness heritage

In the Wilderness you can find solitude, a detachment from normal cares and responsibilities and a renewal of your place with nature. The Wilderness provides inspiration, recreation, physical and mental challenge as well as an opportunity for scientific studies.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 states: "A Wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor and does not remain."

at least 100 feet from lakes, streams and trails. Please avoid campfires which have obviously been heavily used. You may cut dead or down trees for tents and firewood. Remove all temporary camp facilities when breaking camp. Always keep and leave a clean camp.

Most soil within the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness is granitic in origin. As a result, plant cover is easily disturbed and forage often limited. Here wounds inflicted by man and beast heal slowly, if at all.

Wilderness is man's heritage. A good woodsman who really understands the Wilderness concept and has developed a Wilderness ethic, takes pride in leaving little evidence of his stay. The following guidelines will help minimize man's impact on the Wilderness:

- Select an area screened from trails, lakes and campfires for loading and unloading pack stock.
- Erect temporary pole or rope hitchhacks when tying stock for extended periods.
- Scatter concentrations of manure when breaking camp.
- Natural forage is scarce. Use pelletized feed as the main diet for pack and saddle animals. The use of pelletized feed will aid in preventing the introduction of weed and non-native seeds found in hay.
- Move animals frequently when grazing on natural forage. This will maintain a relatively ungrazed appearance.
- Ride single file and at a walking gait. Avoid shortcuts across meadows or switchbacks. Yield the right-of-way to faster moving traffic at the earliest opportunity. When yielding, avoid abrupt movements and loud talking and do not touch passing animals. Carry hand tools suitable for removing wind-thrown areas from trails.
- Single riders or hikers should yield to pack strings.



nature and wildlife

Wildlife is abundant in the Wilderness area. The sharp-eyed visitor should have little problem spotting mountain goats perched precariously on the steep rocky faces. Elk, Moose, deer, bear and mountain sheep also roam the Wilderness. Small inhabitants, such as the marten, mink, weasel, beaver, otter and badger make their homes along the streams and rivers. Visitors should also sight coyote, bobcat, cougar, pine squirrel, chipmunk, Columbian ground squirrel, golden-mantled squirrel, snowshoe rabbit, marmot and porcupine. You may also see the little pika or rock rabbit, cutting, curing and storing his hay for the winter.

A variety of small birds inhabit the forest, shrike, that home with the larger, more conspicuous fowl. The large water ouzel may be found along streams, feeding on aquatic insects. Also, the visitor will probably spot the Clark's nutcracker (named after explorer Capt. William Clark), Canada jay, Steller's jay, pileated woodpecker, crow, raven, eagle, osprey, falcon, blue grouse, ruffed grouse, Franklin's grouse, hawk and owl. Rainbow, cutthroat, brook and Dolly Varden trout can be found in many of the lakes and streams. The Selway River and its tributaries provide natural spawning beds for chinook salmon and steelhead trout.

take care of your wilderness

While in the Wilderness, you will be "roughing it" without the modern conveniences of electricity, refrigeration or plumbing. There will be no garbage collections and no toilets. If you handle sanitation properly, however, you will leave the land clean and attractive for yourself and others to enjoy. There are right and wrong ways to dispose of wastes in the Wilderness.

travel

Condition your body for Wilderness travel by taking progressively longer walks near home. Make sure you schedule your Wilderness trip with reference to climatic conditions. The period from mid-July through September often provides the best weather for high country traveling. Snow and high water may interfere with travel earlier or later in the year. Cross-country skiing, however, is becoming an increasingly popular winter sport. The lower elevations open earlier for floating the Selway River and hiking the lower trails. Regardless of activity, it is important to be properly equipped, supplied and informed before venturing into the Wilderness area.

backpacking

The trails in this Wilderness frequently follow stream bottoms, subsequently bypassing many points of interest. Cross-country travel, though arduous, will take you to places perhaps never visited by man. It offers great freedom of choice in choosing routes and selecting campsites. Backpackers should travel light with only carefully selected equipment and nutritious food. The weight of packs for novice backpackers should be limited to 30 to 40 pounds for men and less for women and children. Hikers traveling cross-country should plan on averaging no more than four or five miles each day.

river floating trips

The Selway River is recognized as one of the most difficult and demanding small rivers navigated by white water boaters. Many of its rapids are rated Class IV and above. River float trips by kayak and raft should be scheduled from May through July. Low water levels at other times make continuous floating difficult. Boaters should have a rescue plan, travel in teams and have proper gear and equipment.

horseback

Horse travel confines the visitor to improved trails and more gentle terrain. Improperly handled saddle horses and pack stock can destroy the quality of the Wilderness. Use lightweight and compact food and equipment. Take only the number of animals actually needed.

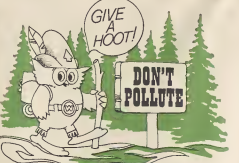
human waste

Fortunately, in the top six or eight inches of soil, nature has provided a system of "biological disposal" that works to decompose organic material. Keeping this in mind, Wilderness latrines can be easily constructed.

Carry with you a small digging tool. A light garden trowel works well. Select a screened spot at least 50 feet from any open water. Dig a hole eight to ten inches in diameter and no deeper than six to eight inches. Keep the soil intact, if possible. After use, fill the hole with loose soil and tramp in the soil. Nature will do the rest in only a few days.

camp waste

Carry out cans, bottles, aluminum foil and anything else that will not burn. Cans are carried easiest if cleaned, flattened and placed in a plastic bag. Burying this debris is not a satisfactory method of disposal. Animal or frost action will usually expose it. Burn papers and other combustible wastes in your campfire.



forest supervisors

Bitterroot National Forest
Hamilton, Montana 59840
Phone: 406-565-5311

Lochsa National Forest
Missoula, Montana 59801
Phone: 406-549-6511

district rangers

Barby Ranger Station
Dority, Montana 59829
Phone: 406-812-1234

Sevenside Ranger Station
Sevenside, Montana 59870
Phone: 406-775-5441

Lochsa Ranger Station
Ramsay, Idaho 83439
Phone: 208-242-6215

Missoula Ranger Station
Missoula, Montana 59801
Phone: 406-549-6511

Magnum Ranger Station
Hamilton, Montana 59840
Phone: 406-565-3745

Power Ranger Station
Lolo, Montana 59847
Phone: 208-475-0916

Selway Ranger Station
Kootenai, Idaho 83239
Phone: 208-824-8239

Moose Creek Ranger Station
Coeur d'Alene, Idaho 83201
Phone: 208-983-1550

Red River Ranger Station
Elk City, Idaho 83520
Phone: 208-862-1235

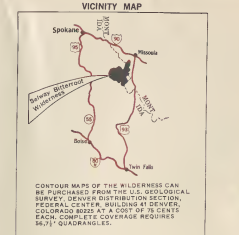
West Fork Ranger Station
Woot, Montana 59820
Phone: 406-821-2346

outfitters and guide services

Idaho Outfitters and Guides Association
Boise, Idaho 83703

Idaho Outfitters and Guides
Boise, Montana 59801

Montana Outfitters and Guide Services Association
Bozeman, Montana 59715



fishing and hunting regulations

Idaho Fish and Game Department
Idaho, Idaho 83707

Montana Fish and Game Department
Helena, Montana 59601

aircraft

Within the Wilderness there are three Forest Service airfields. They are open to both public and administrative use. The airfields are subject to the provisions of the Wilderness Act. Only experienced mountain pilots should attempt to use these airfields. Landing of aircraft in areas other than these and private airfields is prohibited. For further information, contact the Supervisor, Nezperce National Forest, 319 East Main, Grangeville, Idaho 83530, Phone: 208-983-1950.

more detailed maps

For a free index to topographic maps of Idaho, write: Distribution Section, Geological Survey, Federal Center, Denver, Colorado 80225

